

# Problems With Traditional Language Courses

Crystal Holmes  
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Many people struggle with foreign language classes in high school and college. They think that they just don't have the "gift" or some other magical element to be successful at language learning. While I think some blame is the student's, the bulk of the blame rests squarely on the shoulders of the teachers and "the system".

In school, I never had a problem with foreign languages – in fact, they were my favorite subjects. But I know that my experience wasn't typical; I watched many of my classmates struggle with concepts I thought were remarkably easy. However, even though I aced all my tests, I still found flaws in how foreign languages were taught. For me, the courses progressed too slowly, and the material sometimes lacked a direct application or usefulness to the real world ("when will I ever use this?")

In a traditional foreign language course, the teacher lectures about grammar, perhaps plays a short video or audio with native speakers speaking, and assigns homework. The student listens, takes notes, sometimes participates in speaking activities in class, and completes assignments about grammar both in class and at home. The teacher is responsible for covering a certain amount of material before the term is over, and the student is responsible for remembering that information long enough to pass the exam and earn the credit so they can forget the language and move on with their lives.

There are many problems with this setup. Firstly, the material isn't interesting to the students. Why should they care about learning it? It has no value to their current situation, and it's just plain boring with all those incomprehensible grammar rules. If learning a language was all grammar, then only the strongest in spirit would ever learn them.

Secondly, the teacher sets the pace, but it is often not the pace the student needs. In some cases, it will be too slow, but in most cases, the material is just coming at the students too quickly. One rule is barely understood before another one is being built on top of it.

Another thing that's horribly wrong with this is that it only focuses on remembering rules and words, not on developing the skills of being able to communicate in the language. Memory and skills are two vastly different things. Memory is largely academic, but skills require more than just the mind. For example, if you ever learned to play piano, you might "remember" how to play a certain song, but that "memory" is stored in your ears, mind, and fingers – not in your mind alone. You don't consciously think about which notes come next; your fingers remember! Learning piano develops skills; memorizing sheet music without ever playing the piano is exercising the memory.

Traditional learning methods are like this. They tell you to learn this, learn that; it's much like memorizing sheet music. But you never get to play it. You might have a few chances to listen to

what it is supposed to sound like, and you might have just a few chances to tap out a few measures of that sheet music, but learning a language, like learning a song on the piano, requires lots of repetition – lots of doing.

You don't learn to play piano by reading about technique or listening to great pieces; you learn to play piano by playing. Language learning is the same way. You don't learn a language by reading about the language or reading a few survival phrases, or listening to the language being spoken. You learn a language by speaking in the language and writing in the language. Producing output is the key. But that output has to be interesting to you, and it has to come at the right time – when you're ready to jump over the next hurdle.

Just because there are many problems with traditional courses doesn't mean that you can't use them. On the contrary, you just have to supplement them with lots of speaking and writing exercises – above and beyond what's required for the course.

As an independent language learner, you can select your own material, set your own pace, and choose your own activities. There will be many more posts about how to choose materials and activities, so stay tuned. However, if there is one thing you should remember from this post, it is this: You learn by doing, and the more you do, the more you will learn.